Name of John

Bernice Fox*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

THE line of civilians waiting to be interviewed stretched the full length of the long central corridor of the NAS Administration Building. Before our Public Relations door the line forked, some of the dark-skinned applicants being processed across the hall under the Civilian Personnel officer and the rest splitting off for me to handle...
THE line of civilians waiting to be interviewed stretched the full length of the long central corridor of the NAS Administration Building. Before our Public Relations door the line forked, some of the dark-skinned applicants being processed across the hall under the Civilian Personnel officer and the rest splitting off for me to handle. It was the sort of dull responsibility that Wave petty officers frequently had thrust upon them.

"Next."

By eleven o'clock, I'd interviewed twenty-five or thirty Kanakas and I didn't bother to look up anymore as the applicants strolled in. The heat of the day was beginning to press down on the island, and there was still an hour to go before I could secure the office and go to chow.

I slammed another card atop the 'done' pile and went to yank open the office door and call, "Next," again.

This time the door slammed, and quick, staccato footsteps followed me so closely I barely reached my place behind the desk before he did. I remained standing, staring with interest. He was taller than most Hawaiian men — taller and tensely erect.

"I am waiting three hours already." he sputtered.

Our eyes clashed. In his, I saw discs of impatience.

"The Navy," I said, "can't put people to work on a military base before they have been thoroughly."

He wasn't listening. His lips were flattened into hard lines of indignation. I smiled, dropped into my chair, inserted a fresh card, and thought how like a proud young chieftan he looked, come here to discuss peace terms—his narrow hips accentuated in tight-fitting dungarees, his faded work shirt unbuttoned almost to the waist showing the tough tan of his chest, the shirt sleeves wadded and rolled high on his strong brown arms where muscles strained.

"Sit there," I said, indicating the chair where all the others had sat.
Feeling his eyes watching me, I snapped the soft-roller button with a flourish, gave the space bar a final expert thump, and looked up to find him still standing. His look had changed from honest irritation to sly evaluating. All the Island men had that look. It was coolly judging, withholding a verdict, but it was clearly based in sex, someway.

I motioned again for him to sit down.

"Your screening slip?" I indicated the temporary identification slips that had been issued at the Labor Office, pointing to the stack of them I'd collected from the others before him.

The man remained motionless, completing his staring. It wasn't a rude stare—nor uncomplimentary, only disturbing with its unwavering, almost innocent intensity.

"These things." I repeated, sharply. "You can't be interviewed if you don't have one. ."

He roused himself and focused his attention on my request. He drew out a worn billfold, unfolded it, and reached inside. Oblivious to my outstretched hand, he scrutinized the slip for a long moment before handing it over.

"Okay," I said, snatching it and smoothing it out beside my typewriter. "Sit down."

Still he remained standing. I scowled. Maybe he didn't understand. Maybe he didn't want to understand.

"Look." I reached over and picked up a finished personnel card to show him, "This is going to take awhile. So will you sit down. . "all the authority faded from my voice as my eyes swung up to meet his head-on, and to recoil from the calm pride in them. I was shaken to hear myself adding, meekly, "... please?"

There was, I thought, a faint flicker of triumph in the black depths of his eyes. At once he dropped his lean body easily into the chair and waited.

"Your name," I said, looking over to his identification slip, and spelling it aloud as I typed it in the blank, "J-o-h-n. "then I stopped to puzzle over the scribbled last name on the slip. "John—what's the last name?"

He seemed not to hear.

"Your name—the last name." I was waiting with the shift key down. "What is it?"
His eyes flicked down to the scribbling on the slip, then met mine blankly. I frowned. Maybe he didn’t understand. I re-checked. There, snaking across the lower right-hand corner of the slip was the red-penciled check which the Labor Office used to designate that the applicant could speak and understand English. This fellow was trying to give me a hard time. It seemed strange—he had such an intelligent twinkle in his eye—and usually it wasn’t the young natives who put on the dumb acts. Young fellows like him exerted themselves to show their knowledge of English—then got hilariously involved in pigin idioms.

I pinned him down with a cross look. “What is your name?”

His shoulders hunched. “J-o-h-n,” he mimicked, then was contrite, but offered nothing more.


He craned his neck to inspect the writing on the slip. “That? Is not my name I have told the man, is not my name. Is my grandfather, his name there. But the man say I can use it. So. . .” he shrugged.

He returned my long gaze with an equally long look of indifference.

“Okay,” I conceded, feeling that this was turning into a scene from Gilbert and Sullivan. “So this isn’t your name. It’s your grandfather’s. But WHAT IS HIS NAME?”

“Is John Rodrigues. Is right there—the man, he wrote it. He tells me, is all right that I use—”

I broke in with a flurry of typing, making a wild stab at spelling Rodrigues. Anything to move beyond the impasse.

“How old are you?” I asked, moving down to the next blank.

He understood at once, I knew, but his attention had settled on my hands and he’d been watching, rapt, as I’d fingered the keys of the typewriter.

“Soon now I am seventeen,” he announced, calling up a calm pride in the fact. I stole a sceptical glance. He appeared to be at least twenty-two or twenty-three. There was a strong inclination to challenge him, but I reminded myself that these mixed races were deceptive. The beard shadows along
his jaws could be genuine—and he could still be only seventeen.

"Okay." I typed that in. "Where were you born?"

Again, he hesitated waiting for me to prod him with a stern glare. It was obvious now that he was enjoying this little game. He had suddenly found himself the central figure in an unrehearsed drama and he would not hurry his lines. With a look of shy questioning, he drew forth a pack of cigarettes from a breast pocket and glanced around, as if unsure whether or not smoking was allowed in the Ad Building. I nodded permission for him to light up. Even this simple operation seemed to intensify the situation because he twirled the match in his slim, brown fingers a long moment before applying it to his cigarette, watching me unblinkingly over the flame.

"Where were you born?" I asked again.

"In Honolulu,—I guess." He exhaled the answer along with his first long puff.

"You guess?" The tiny pin pricks of annoyance were spreading now. This was just another smart-aleck island kid trying to bother me. "Don't you even know that?"

His startled expression only added to my annoyance. He was startled at my tone, but there was still a relaxed, playful attitude which infuriated me. There was a blind moment when I felt that—to him—all my questions were irrelevant and he was the one who was exercising patience.

"Look," I appealed to him afresh, "I've got to know these things. Personally, I don't care—but see these cards? They have to be filled out COMPLETELY and the Security Office has to investigate every single one before anybody is hired. If you don't want to answer these questions—"

"I am answering."

I sighed. "But you can't 'guess' you were born in Honolulu."

"I cannot say—if I do not know."

I blinked and leaned back to frown at him. "But you must know your name and where you were born!"

His answer was a flick of cigarette ash and the careful redirection of his gaze from my face to the open window behind me.
I typed in 'Honolulu' in the proper blank and went on. "Your address? Where do you live now?"
"In Wiawa."
"Where in Wiawa? What Street?"
"Is no street names in Wiawa," he explained with a faint smile. "All the same. I live with my grandfather there."
"Well. What is his name?"
"Is JOHN!" His tone rang with surprise that my memory was so feeble.
"Oh, yes." I moved on to the next blank.
"Your father's name?"
Slowly his eyes lifted from the cigarette butt he was studying. There were unmistakable shadows of reproach in them, but he shook his head tolerantly. "That," he said, as if explaining something to an imbecile, "is what I am not knowing."
"Oh."
I turned the roller to the next line and suddenly my irritation was gone.
"And your mother?" I asked meekly, "do you know who she was?"
His eyes flared. "Yes! I know."
I waited. Then, at last, "Who?"
"Antoni Rodrigues."
"And where does she live?"
"She? Is not living—since I am only a baby."
"Oh."
I slipped a quick side-long glance, meaning to add, "I'm sorry," but he gazed off into space dreamily, undisturbed by my stupidity.
"Your nationality?"
His chin lifted quickly. "American."
"No—I mean. . nationalit..."
A curious, fanatical gleam burned in his eyes. "I am American," he insisted feverishly, "I am just like you—American. ."
I nodded quick agreement. "But see," I explained, "I am also part French and part German. That is my nationality because that is what my parents were. That is my blood—and yours?"
He toyed stubbornly with a packet of matches and would not look up. "This is a territory of the United States," he said firmly, "so! I am born here and I am American."

I leaned back and groped for my own package of cigarettes. I needed one. Instantly, he was on his feet, holding a lighted match for me. I nodded my thanks, took a long puff, then went back to considering the blanks still un-filled on the personnel card in my machine.

"Now then," I began, putting my cigarette aside, "Your mother, You know who she was. Was she French? Dutch? English? Japanese? What?"

"My mother," he spoke hastily, "she was Portugese. But I."

"And your father," I broke in, "what was he."

Too late, I realized an old mistake. I looked over at young John, wanting to apologize for my clumsiness, but he was not looking at me. His eyes had narrowed pensively and were focused far out in the bay where a PBM squadron was coming in for landings. I saw the sharp clearness of his profile, the clean olive of his skin, the silky softness of his black hair. I looked back at the unfinished card. What difference did it make who his father had been? I moved to shift the carriage over to the next blank and as I moved, John stirred.

"My father—he was a sailor." His tone of intimacy unnerved me. "That much I know. He could have been killed—maybe. That could be why he did not come back. He was American I think. Don't you think? Don't you think he could have been?" His eyes burned into mine with pleading. I looked away quickly and busied myself grinding out my cigarette.

"Sure. He probably was an American sailor," I said.

John sighed profoundly as if my opinion had settled his last doubt. I realized he'd been expecting me to laugh, and when I hadn't he'd been confused. There was a sheen of moisture in his eyes which he blinked back furiously.

"How—how far have you gone in school, John?" It was best to go on to the next blank and leave his nationality unsolved.

"Just a week ago I am graduated—from high school in
Wiawa." There was a broad note of pride in his voice. I smiled and typed in 'H.S. Grad. June, 1945'.

I flipped the card out of the machine and reached for a pen to insert his Civil Service rating. He rose reluctantly.

"You realize,' I explained "This is only a temporary job. When the war is over, the job will be over. ."

He nodded. "But," he confided impulsively, "I am hoping the war is not over for one more year yet."

I lifted a sharp look of suspicion. "Why?"

"Because then," he flashed a wide boyish smile and really looked 'almost seventeen,' "I am old enough to enlist in the Navy and my grandfather, he cannot stop me!"

I frowned at him. "What has the war got to do with you joining the Navy?"

"They will not take us from here," he explained, "when it is peacetime. Now I would run away from my grandfather and join—but they will not take me without my grandfather's —his consent." He shrugged. "He does not like the Navy."

I handed him the slips he must take to the Photo Lab for his identification picture. He started toward the door, but now he paused as if waiting for some further comment from me.

"No." his eyes flared. "But they would send me to the Mainland for boot camp. I could always—you know. ." one eyebrow lifted significantly, " 'go over the hill'."

I was puzzled. "If that's how you feel, then why are you so anxious to . ."

He had turned the door knob and was about to leave, but now he carefully turned back to face me. "How ELSE could I ever get to the United States?" he asked simply. As I started, his face broke into a warm smile and with a jaunty wave, he jerked open the door and was gone.

I rose to go and call "Next," but my eyes dropped to John's card with the nationality blank only half-filled-in. I could complete it now. There wasn't any doubt. I slipped it back in the machine and added "American."

—Bernice Fox, Sci. Sr.